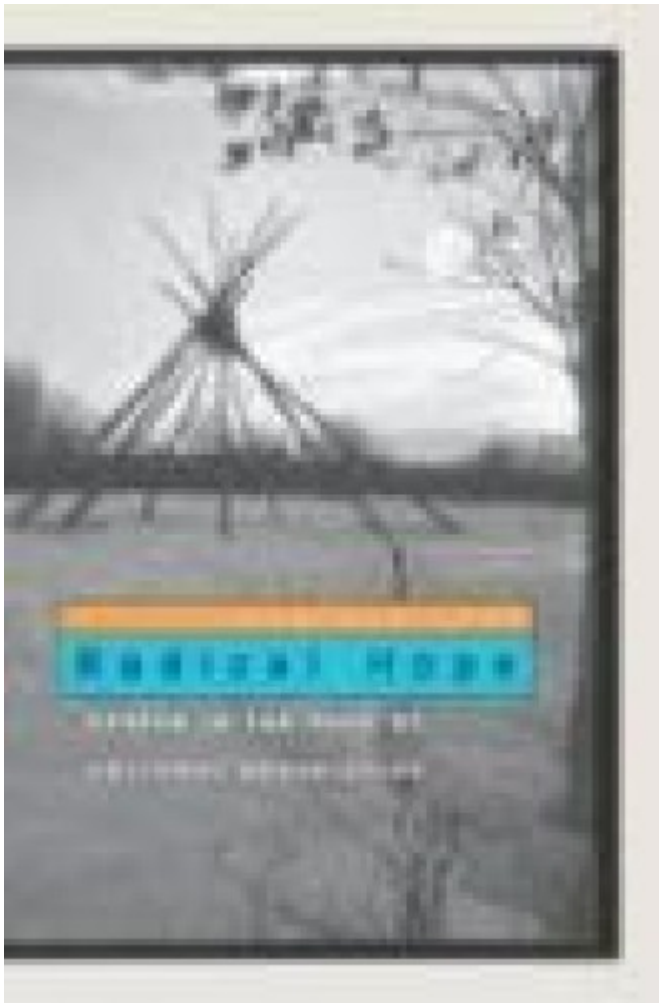


Radical Hope

reviewed by [Stanley Hauerwas](#) and [David Toole](#)

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In Review



Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation

Jonathan Lear

Harvard University Press

Two stories run through this book. The first is about the devastation of Crow culture in the 19th century as whites settled the region that is now southeastern Montana and northern Wyoming; the second concerns not the devastation of Crow culture but the vulnerability of our own culture after the events of 9/11. In the text, these stories are intertwined, but in this review we treat them separately.

Crow culture centered on hunting and war. To depict this culture, Lear draws on the work of Frank Linderman, who in 1927 interviewed Plenty Coups, a Crow warrior and chief (1846-1932). Plenty Coups spoke freely to Linderman about the life of the Crow prior to the mid-1880s, but of life after that he had nothing to say: "You know that part of my life as well as I do. You saw what happened to us when the buffalo went away. . . . The hearts of my people fell to the ground, and they could not lift them up again. After this nothing happened. There was little singing anywhere."

"After this nothing happened." Lear, a philosopher as well as a psychotherapist, reflects on this statement. What might it mean? "It would seem," Lear says, "to be the retrospective declaration that history has come to an end. But what could it mean for history to exhaust itself?"

Lear's answer to this question, shaped deeply by Ludwig Wittgenstein, involves a careful exploration of what a "happening" is. Concepts get their lives from the lives people live. When the Crow could no longer live lives rooted in the practices of buffalo hunting and intertribal warfare, their concepts lost significance and their lives became unintelligible. Thus the poignant experience of Pretty Shield, a Crow woman who also told her story to Frank Linderman: "I am trying to live a life that I do not understand."

When Plenty Coups told Linderman that after the buffalo went away the hearts of his people fell to the ground and "there was little singing anywhere," he was not being poetic but naming the fact that the very practices that had sustained Crow culture had ceased to exist. What makes Plenty Coups interesting for Lear is that he lived past the point when Crow things ceased to happen to the Crow. Indeed, he lived through cultural collapse and yet continued to lead his people toward an uncertain future.

What kind of feat was this, and how did he accomplish it? Lear focuses on a dream that Plenty Coups had as a boy of nine or ten, when he journeyed into the Crazy Mountains to seek a dream-vision—a normal rite of passage for young Crow boys.

Plenty Coups reported his dream-vision to Crow leaders, and the dream and its interpretation became part of the tribe's public life. In his dream, Plenty Coups saw all the buffalo disappear into a hole in the ground and then watched as spotted buffalo (cows) emerged to take their place. He then saw a powerful storm descend upon a forest. When the storm had passed, only one tree remained standing, and a voice called attention to the lodge of the Chickadee that rested in the tree. Only the lodge of the Chickadee-person, who is least in strength but strongest of mind, was left unharmed by the wind. The Chickadee survived because the Chickadee is willing to seek wisdom and is a good listener. The Chickadee told Plenty Coups that one "gains successes and avoids failure by learning how others succeeded or failed. . . . Develop your body, but do not neglect your mind, Plenty Coups. It is the mind that leads a man to power."

Yellow Bear and other elders explained the dream to Plenty Coups and the Crow community: the buffalo would go away forever, and whites would take over the country. Yellow Bear went on to say, however, that if the Crow listened as the Chickadee does, they might escape that fate and keep their lands. Lear argues that embedded in this dream was what he deems "radical hope"—radical because it is "directed toward a future goodness that transcends the current ability to understand what it is."

Through his dream and its interpretation, Plenty Coups became the agent of that hope, because he recognized that white settlement had devastated the traditional ways of structuring significance. Plenty Coups's genius was to acknowledge that the destruction of his culture was so total that it no longer made sense even to die a Crow death; the only thing that did make sense, therefore, was to live on with the radical hope that the Crow had a future.

In practical terms, the Crow enactment of Plenty Coups's dream meant that the Crow chose not to fight the white settlers and instead allied themselves with the U.S. military against other tribes, most notably the Sioux. Plenty Coups explained this cooperation with the whites: "When I fought with the white man against them [Sioux and Cheyenne] it was not because I loved him or hated the Sioux or Cheyenne, but because I saw that this was the only way we could keep our lands. Look at our country! It was chosen by my people out of the heart of the most beautiful land in all the world because we were wise. And it is my dream that taught us the way."

Lear thinks it is arguable that Plenty Coups's imaginative leadership was a historical success and "that the Crow ended up better off by following this advice than they would have been by any other strategy." To make this point, Lear contrasts Plenty Coups with his great Sioux rival, Sitting Bull. Both chiefs had to respond to a messianic movement called the Ghost Dance that swept through many of the tribes of the American West in the 1880s and 1890s. The result of a dream by a holy man named Wovoka, the dance was the vehicle to eliminate whites and restore the buffalo. Sitting Bull supported the dance, but Plenty Coups opposed it. Lear observes that in a sense Plenty Coups and Sitting Bull had the same dream but interpreted it in opposite ways. Both saw the ghosts of the buffalo, but Plenty Coups thought the buffalo were gone forever, whereas Sitting Bull thought they were coming back.

From Lear's perspective, Sitting Bull and his followers signify the danger of all forms of messianic religions—that is, they mistake a wish for reality. They assume that the world can be magically transformed without any realistic practical steps to bring this transformation about. For the Sioux, the only activity in which one was enjoined to partake was a ritual, in this case a dance. Lear observes: "When the ritual comes to take over one's entire life, as it did for the Sioux . . . this is a case of what Freud called 'turning away from reality.' . . . And it led to disaster for the Sioux."

This, then, is the judgment Lear offers: Sitting Bull refused to admit that all was lost; moreover, he encouraged wholesale participation in a new ritual in a last attempt to save his people. Nothing came to pass except Sitting Bull's arrest and murder and the surrender of the last of his people. Plenty Coups, by contrast, acknowledged that Crow culture was utterly devastated, made accommodations with whites, and preserved at least some Crow land.

This judgment reveals the extent to which Lear's second story about our own cultural vulnerability determines how he tells the story of Plenty Coups and the Crow. Indeed, Lear is not really interested in the Crow as such: "I am not primarily concerned with what actually happened to the Crow tribe or to any other group. I am concerned rather with the field of possibilities in which all human endeavor gains meaning." For Lear, the story of Plenty Coups is a means to explore how our own culture might face with courage and integrity a collapse akin to that of the Crow in the 19th century—one so severe that it demolished what counted as courage and integrity.

How does one face courageously the fact that it is no longer possible to live, or die, with courage? This is the challenge that Plenty Coups faced “when the buffalo went away.” It is with Plenty Coups’s response to this challenge in mind that Lear wonders “what we might legitimately hope at a time when the sense of purpose and meaning that has been bequeathed to us by our culture has collapsed.”

Lear’s book is full of insights. Indeed, we think his careful exposition of Crow cultural practice provides a compelling exemplification of practical reason. But these insights are unwittingly parasitic upon genocide. Lear has no sense of the irony involved in his use of the Crow to recommend “radical hope” in the face of the trials and tribulations of post-9/11 America. After all, the culture that has bequeathed to us a sense of purpose and meaning that now founders is the same culture that destroyed the Crow.

We must ask, therefore, if Lear’s presumption that we can learn from Plenty Coups is not an exercise in self-deception. Of course, everything depends on the nature of this “we.” As Christians, we must challenge Lear’s preference for Plenty Coups’s pragmatism over Sitting Bull’s martyrdom. For we believe, like Sitting Bull, that the world can be magically transformed, because we believe that the world *has* been magically transformed. That magic, moreover, should make it possible for us to tell the story in a way that acknowledges Christian complicity in the colonizing forces that devastated Crow culture. Such a telling of the story would force us to confront the realities of a world in which we continue to live alongside people whose forebears we killed.

Yet that story must also include the miracle that many Crow and Sioux alike found hope and endurance through conversion to the gospel. The eschatological hope that the gospel makes possible may share family resemblances with Lear’s understanding of radical hope. But Christian hope is constituted by practices that provide resistance to colonizing powers. Lear, whose own cultural commitments seem to remain bound to modern political conceptions and structures, does not tell this story, but it is a story that needs to be told. In the meantime, we can be grateful that Lear has begun telling the story in a way that helps Christians see that there are ways to go on even when it appears that history has exhausted itself.

Stanley Hauerwas and David Toole are colleagues at Duke Divinity School, where Hauerwas teaches theological ethics and Toole serves as an associate dean.